

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING STRATEGY AND SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ESSAY WRITING IN IDAH EDUCATION ZONE, KOGI STATE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research work was to investigate Collaborative Learning Strategy (CLS) and Writing Skills performance of Senior Secondary School Students in Idah Education Zone of Kogi State, Nigeria. Pre-test, post-test non-equivalent quasi experimental, non-randomised control group design was utilised. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study. A sample size of eighty (80) SSII students made up of thirty eight (38) males and forty two (42) female, from all the intact classes in the two secondary schools was used for this study.. The pre-test was administered to both groups before treatment commenced and after four weeks of treatment, the same instrument was administered as post-test. The data collected were used to answer research questions and to test the null hypotheses. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation while the hypotheses were tested using Analysis of Co-variance (ANCOVA) at 0.05 level of significance. The result indicated that Collaborative Learning Strategy had significant effect on students' performance in essay writing skills; but there was no significant difference in the mean achievement of male and female students taught using CLS. It was therefore recommended among others that: Collaborative Learning Strategy should be adopted in the teaching and learning of essay writing in senior secondary schools in Nigeria. Also, both male and female students should be exposed to CLS.

KEYWORDS: *Collaborative Learning Strategy, Writing Skills, Gender, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Learning Theory.*

INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of secondary education is to prepare the students to be useful in the society and to equip them for tertiary institutions. Secondary education equips students to live effectively in the modern age of science and technology; raise a generation of people who can think for

themselves, respect the views and feelings of others, respect the dignity of labour and live as good citizens; foster the Nigerian unity with emphasis on the common ties that unite within diversity; and foster the desire for achievement and self-improvement (UNESCO, 2006). With respect to curriculum adopted to achieve this aim, the report of UNESCO (2006) states that the English language is the most important subject. The reason for this is instantly obvious considering the fact that all other subjects, except the three indigenous languages (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) are taught in English.

Consequently, students are expected to acquire adequate knowledge of the English language, and have a sound command of the four basic communication skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) before advancing to institutions of higher learning. Secondary school students' ability to use the English language effectively largely determines, not only their success in examinations in all aspects of their studies, except for the native languages, but also to national development, as young adults in the future. The stability, unity and progress of the entire nation is linked to students' proficiency in English, as far as the Nigerian society is concerned.

In a World Bank study published on the 19th of February, 2001 in *The Guardian*, one of Nigeria's major daily newspaper, it was argued that Nigerian University graduates are poorly trained and unproductive on the job, and that graduates' skills have steadily deteriorated over the decades. According to the report, the poor performance of Nigerian graduates is particularly evident in two areas; poor mastery of the English Language and lack of requisite technical skill. It was noted in the report that the deficiencies in those vital areas make Nigerian graduates of the past fifteen years unfit for the labour market, and sometimes the larger society (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, 2016).

Miriam (2020) carried out a study on Collaborative Learning Tips and Strategies in Secondary School. The result of the study showed that collaborative learning teams attained higher level thinking and preserve information for longer time, than students working individually. This is attributed to 'the fact that the groups tend to learn through discussion and clarification of ideas. Perhaps, information that is discussed is retained in long-term memory. The study is related to the present study because the researchers are also interested in the need to improve students' proficiency in learning, specifically, their (essay) writing skills. Collaborative learning strategy is one variable that is present in both studies. The difference in the two studies is the fact that in the previous research, the respondents were secondary school teachers, while in this present study, secondary school students are the respondents. Moreover, the previous study investigated learning generally where as, the focus of this study is essay writing skills.

In a similar study carried out by Uzoegwu (2004), it was found out that there is a significant effect of Cooperative Learning Strategy on gender in terms of students' achievement score in essay writing. There was however, no significant interaction effect of (direct) instruction method and gender, location and ability. Torty (2010) investigated the effect of collaborative learning strategy on secondary school student's achievement in writing and found out that students taught with collaborative learning strategy had higher post mean score than those taught with the traditional lecture method. In a related study, Aisha (2016) found out that collaborative learning had no beneficial effect on the students' exercise and foster skills or in their scores for mid-term examination. However, collaborative learning had a significant effect on the students' proposal writing scores.

Collaborative Learning Strategy

Several innovative strategies have been introduced into teaching and learning in order to advance the way teaching is done in schools. Some of these strategies are: flipped classroom, collaborative learning, cooperative learning, problem based/embodied learning, situational learning, conceptual/contextual learning, mobile learning, active learning, work based learning, etc. Most innovative techniques embrace the four Cs also known as the learning skills. The four Cs or learning skills are: *critical thinking*, *creative thinking*, *communication* and *collaboration*.

Critical Thinking: Critical thinking has to do with making clear and reasoned judgement. It is a way of deciding whether a claim is true, partially true, or false. The individual deliberately and systematically processes information in order to make better decisions, and generally understand things better. Critical thinking brings about reasoned conclusions based on a reasoned process.

Creative Thinking: Creative thinking involves expansive, open-ended invention and discovery of possibilities. The creative thinker is concerned with looking at, and solving problems from different perspective, avoiding conventional solutions and thinking outside the box. The process of thinking creatively allows the individual to explore connections, meet new challenges and seek solutions that are unusual, original and fresh.

Communication: Communication is a two-way interactive process by which individuals (participants in the communication art) reach mutual understanding, exchange information, news, ideas and feelings, and also create thought and meaning. It includes encoding, transmitting, receiving and decoding messages.

Collaboration: Collaboration has to do with working together for a common goal. As it relates to learning, it is a situation in which two or more learners learn or attempt to learn something together. The focus of this work is ‘collaborative learning strategy’.

Collaborative learning is a strategy of teaching and learning that involves group of students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. As remarked in Ochoma (2018), collaborative learning entails group of learners working together to search for understanding, meaning or solutions; to create an artifact or product of their learning. Collaborative learning activities can include: collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, study teams, debates, etc. When learners collaborate, they capitalise on one another’s resources and skills by getting information from one another, evaluating one another’s ideas, monitoring one another’s work, etc.

Collaboration can be informal, formal, asynchronous, synchronous, cloud collaboration, etc. Hence, collaborative learning can be made available by certain technologies, such as e-mail, weblogs, message boards, chats, and teleconferencing. There can as well be teacher-teacher collaboration; learner-learner collaboration; teacher-learner collaboration. There are several advantages of collaborative learning. For instance, collaborative learning allows the fostering of a spirit of cooperation among the students; it enhances the potential of the students and increases their writing ability (Ruiz, et al. 2006; Ochoma, 2018; Ochoma&Ubgoja, 2021).

The essence of students’ collaborative learning design is to provide opportunities for students to communicate effectively to encourage mutual support in order to master the purpose of the lesson. The evolution of the overall connection among the learners, sympathy and cooperation

among them, etc. are some benefits associated with collaborative learning (Bower and Richards, 2006). Learning flourishes in a social environment where collaboration between learners and teachers or among learners, take place

Writing Skills

Writing is one of the language skills that aid people to think, communicate and express ideas in today's world. When people write, they attempt to record their thoughts or ideas using graphic symbol that is socially acceptable. The act of writing is a solitary act; the individual writes alone. A good writer anticipates the reactions of the reader that he cannot see or hear and thus takes such reactions into consideration in his piece ((Okebukola, 2001 in Ochoma, 2014; Ochoma, 2016).

The act of writing is not developed naturally. It requires proper teaching, studying and undergoing a range of activities and training. It is the responsibility of the teacher thus, to lead the students to analyze a written work in terms of correct grammar, correct words, meaningful punctuation, spelling, connecting ideas to develop information and organising it appropriately in an attempt to learn how to write. It is expected that teachers motivate students and provide enabling environment that can help in the development of good writing skills. It is vital that teachers help students by teaching them to write good piece, develop information, arguments or ideas for particular or different kinds of readers.

Essay writing is one of the aspects that every candidate must attend to in any English Language examination. Laraiba et al (2013) carried out a study on "Enhancing students' essay writing skills: An action research project". The findings obtained from the quantitative data showed improvement in the written expression skills of the students. It was observed that teachers can help students improve their essay writing skills by taking some intervention measures. In the same Lutzker (2015) carried out a study, using 17 years old German students to explain and prove that practicing creative writing constantly, tremendously changes and improves students' writing abilities; and that constant practicing of imaginative writing helps to improve students' essay writing skills. Lutzker noted that using creativity in the classroom requires the teachers' total use of collective creativity and collaboration.

Gender and Students' Academic Performance

Gender has been identified as one of the factors that affect performance among students. A research finding reported by Camarata and Woodcock (2006) clarifies that females are better in academic performance than boys. Peterson (2010) reported that girls' writing ability over boys contribute immensely to their language development. Jafari and Ansari (2012) examined the effect of collaboration on learners' writing accuracy and reported that females in the collaboration group out-performed the males. Ochoma (2013) remarked that there is a complex relationship between language and gender in the academic studies of gender. There is wide range of concern by researchers and educators on the public view that English language is feminine and that the females perform better than their male counterparts in English.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Learning Theory

Social Constructivism Learning Theory focuses on personalised learning within the context of social learning and therefore sees knowledge as a human product that is socially and culturally

constructed (Paily, 2013). This work is hinged on Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Learning Theory. Vygotsky is one amongst those who believe that children actively construct their learning and the fact that knowledge is mutually built and constructed. The importance of learning through social engagement, interaction and collaboration originated from Vygotsky. He held that teaming is associated directly with social development, and that learning is a social process that allows learners to grow and develop based on their interactions and socialisation with other people. Learners are to be guided in the learning process, with the teacher making efforts to assist them in their learning (Alex, 2003; Michael et al, 2007).

The whole idea about collaborative learning has so much to do with Vygotsky's idea of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). ZPD has been defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. ZPD is the gap between what the learner can achieve on his own and what he can achieve with the support of others. It considers what the learner can do if aided/guided by peers or adults; its full development depends on full social interaction. It is believed that the ability to attain higher levels of knowledge and understanding is dependent on interaction with other peers that are more advanced. In other words, it is the unequal interactions that make learning possible. The unequal interaction happens when the learners are collaborating among themselves, or with teacher (Ochoma, 2018).

Learning is a social process that occurs when people engage with each other; it is not a journey of passive development but rather an active one that is shaped by external forces. The teacher is to act as a facilitator and gradually withdraws explanation, hints and demonstrations until the learner is able to perform the skill unaided. The teacher should also be able to establish many opportunities for learners to be able to learn with him and more skillful peers. This will encourage learners to learn from previous knowledge they already had, and build the new knowledge. It is necessary that learners are taught in such a way that they will be able to apply the knowledge gained, outside the classroom.

Relating Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Learning Theory to this study, it can be inferred that achievement in writing largely depends on the learners, the environment itself and then the interactions that exist among them. The implication of this is that the English language teacher must give the learners the opportunities to construct, produce and use experiences that are meaningful to enhance their understanding of their environment. This will enable them comfortably think, reason, perceive, talk and reflect about their environment. The learner creates meaning through his or her social interactions with others and the environment.

Statement of the Problem

Shortcomings are particularly observed in the writing skills of the students in secondary schools, particularly in Idah Education Zone of Kogi State, Nigeria. This situation is worrisome, considering the status of English language in Nigeria, coupled with the fact that the ability to write in English language affects academic performance in other subject areas. It is on this note that the researchers are interested in investigating if the collaborative learning strategy can help the learners improve on their essay writing skills.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of CLS on the performance of SSII students in essay writing in Idah Education Zone of Kogi State, Nigeria. To achieve this, the following objectives are put forth: to

1. Investigate the performance of SSII students in essay writing when taught using CLS and Discussion Strategy.
2. Determine the influence of gender on the performance of SSII students taught essay writing using CLS.

Research Question

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the performance of students in essay writing taught with collaborative learning strategy and that of the counter parts taught with discussion strategy?
2. What is the influence of gender on the performance of SSII students taught essay writing using CLS?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are formulated to guide the study:

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy and those taught using discussion strategy.

Ho₂: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of the male and the female students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy.

Methodology

This study utilized a pre-test, post-test non-equivalent quasi-experimental design. As a quasi-experimental study, there was no random assignment of subjects; rather, intact classes were used for the study. There was a treatment group where students were taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy and a control group that was taught using discussion strategy.

The population of the study comprised a total of 3,123 SSII students, with a sample size of 80, 38 males and 42 females. The Simple random sampling technique was used to select two secondary schools, both government owned and co-educational (mixed). One of the mixed schools was assigned to the treatment group while the second one was assigned to the control group. This was done through the toss of a coin. In all the schools, intact classes were used.

The instrument used for the study was an English Language Essay Writing Test (ELEWT). It was subjected to face and content validity, and reliability tests. A reliability index of 0.76 was obtained, using the test re-test method. At the outset of the experiment, the ELEWT was administered to the students in both the treatment and control groups by the subject teachers as the pre-test. The question papers and the answer scripts were retrieved from the students at the end of the test so that the possibility of using it for revision will be minimized. At the end of the experiment which lasted for four weeks, the same ELEWT was administered to the students as post-test, but with the items reshuffled. Scores were assigned based on content, clarity,

coherence and mechanical accuracy. The obtained from both pre-test and post-test were used to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses. While the research questions were answered using Mean and Standard Deviation, the null hypotheses were tested using Analysis of Co-Variance (ANCOVA), at 0.05 level of significance.

Result

Research Question1: What is the performance of students in essay writing taught with collaborative learning strategy and that of the counterparts taught with discussion strategy?

TABLE 1: MEAN ACHIEVEMENT SCORES OF STUDENTS' FOR THE TWO GROUPS IN ESSAY WRITING SKILLS

Variable		Pretest		Posttest		Mean gain
Instructional Mode	N	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
Treatment group (Collaborative Strategy)	44	36.13	4.74	63.30	5.52	31.8
Control group (Discussion Strategy)	36	38.43	5.63	43.30	4.71	6.75

Results in Table 1 show that the experimental group had a pretest mean of 36.13 with a standard deviation of 4.74 and a posttest mean of 63.30 with a standard deviation of 5.52. The difference between the pretest and posttest mean for the experimental group was 31.8. The control group had a pretest mean of 36.43 with a standard deviation of 5.63 and a posttest mean of 43.30 with a standard deviation of 4.71. The difference between the pretest and posttest mean for control group was 6.55. However, for each of the groups, the posttest means were greater than the pretest means with the experimental group having the higher mean gain. This is an indication that instructional strategy has some effects on students' achievement in easy writing.

Research Question 2: What are the mean writing skills scores of male and female senior secondary school students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy?

TABLE 2: MEAN WRITING SKILL SCORES OF MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS TAUGHT ESSAY WRITING USING THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING STRATEGY

Variable		Pretest Interest		Posttest Interest		Mean gain
Gender	N	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD	
Male	38	36.66	6.22	69.89	6.45	30.03
Female	42	37.38	5.8	72.00	5.26	32.53

Results in table 2 above show that male students had a pretest mean of 36.66 with a standard deviation of 6.22 and a posttest mean of 69.89 with a standard deviation of 6.45. The difference between the pretest and posttest mean for the male students was 32.03. The female students had a pretest mean of 37.38 with a standard deviation of 5.8 and a posttest mean of 72.00 with a standard deviation of 5.26. The difference between the pretest and posttest mean for the female was 32.53. However, for each of the groups, the posttest means were greater than the pretest means with the female students having the higher mean gain. This is an indication that instructional strategy has some effects on female students' achievement in easy writing skills more than their male counterpart.

Hypotheses

Ho₁: There is no significant difference in the mean writing skill scores of students taught writing skills using the collaborative learning strategy and those taught using the conventional method.

TABLE 3: ANCOVA TABLE FOR STUDENTS OVERALL WRITING SKILL SCORES BY METHODS AND FOR INTERACTIONS

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Dec.
Corrected Model	20656.584 ^a	0	10226.352	313.361	0.00	0.83	
Intercept	6836.099	1	6836.099	211.438	0.00	0.62	
Pretest	579.090	1	579.090	15.728	0.00	0.12	
Group	20831.935	1	20831.935	442.735	0.00	0.83	S
Error	3101.206	73	32.301				
Total	362677.000	80					
Corrected Total	22668.751	79					

Note: S = Significant NS = Not Significant, $\alpha = 0.05$

For hypothesis 1, the alpha level (0.05) is greater than the probability value (.000). This indicates significant result. Based on the decision rule the researcher rejects the null hypothesis and concludes that there is significant difference in the mean writing skill scores of students taught writing skills using the collaborative learning strategy and those taught using the discussion teaching method

Ho₂: There is no significant difference in the mean writing skill scores of male and female students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy.

TABLE 4: ANALYSIS OF CO-VARIANCE OF MEAN WRITING SKILL SCORES OF MALE AND FEMALE STUDENTS WHO WERE TAUGHT ESSAY WRITING USING THE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING METHOD (TREATMENT GROUPS ONLY)

Source of variation	Sum of squares	DF	Mean square	F	Sig of F
Covariates (Pretest)	7922.570	1	7922.570	358.988	.000
Main Effects (Gender)	8.262	0	8.262	.374	.541
Explained	7930.832	1	3965.416	179.681	.000
Residual	4899.363	78	22.069		
Total	12830.196	80	57.278		

Summary of data analysis shown in Table 4 reveals that the alpha level (0.05) is less than the significance of F-value (.541). Based on the decision rule the researcher upholds the null hypothesis and concludes that there is no significant difference in the mean writing skill scores of male and female students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy and those taught using conventional method.

Summary of the Findings

Results attained in this study reveal the following as the major findings:

1. Collaborative learning strategy has significant effect on students' academic performance in writing skills. The group taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy, performed significantly higher than the group taught essay writing using the discussion method.
2. There is no significant difference in the mean scores of male and female students taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that students in the treatment group taught essay writing using the collaborative learning strategy obtained a higher mean achievement score than those in the control group who were taught essay writing using the discussion strategy. This is in agreement with the findings of Uzoegwu (2014), whose findings showed that there is a significant effect of co-operative learning strategy on the students' achievement in essay writing in the English Language. The present study also agrees with Torty (2010), whose findings revealed that students taught with collaborative learning strategy had higher post mean score than those taught with the traditional lecture method.

Table 2 reveals that the females achieved slightly higher than the male students. The males had adjusted mean score of 67.44 while the females had 67.55. This was not found to be statistically significant in the test of hypothesis. This finding disagrees with Uzoegwu (2004) who found out in his study that gender was a significant factor in students' achievement in language. Uzoegwu came to the conclusion that the male students achieved higher than their female counterparts in essay writing in the English language. However, the results of this finding agree with the findings of Torty (2010), that gender has no significant influence on students' achievement. The researchers did not establish any significant difference in the achievement of male and female students taught English language using different methods and techniques. This indicates that with the effective application of the collaborative approach, good results can be attained by both male and female students.

CONCLUSION

Developing good writing skills generally in students, is crucial. This is because an individual's ability to write well marks him out as literate. Moreover, students are assessed in most examinations through what they write, irrespective of the subject. It is the responsibility of the teacher to create an enabling environment that will facilitate the development of good writing skills in student. One way the teacher can do this is by the choice of method or strategy he decides to use. The traditional methods of teaching which discussion is one, have been found to be unsatisfactory even as shown in the result obtained in this study. Hence, teachers should be all out to incorporate collaborative learning strategy in the teaching of writing skills, specifically essay writing skills, in order to attain results that will bring about changes in our educational system.

Recommendations

1. Collaborative learning strategy should be adopted in the teaching and learning of writing in senior secondary schools in Nigeria since it improves students' writing skills.

2. Teachers should provide students with the necessary assistance and encouragement at the right time.
3. Teachers should give learners opportunities to construct, produce and use experiences that are meaningful to enhance their understanding of their environment.
4. Both male and female students should be exposed to collaborative teaching strategy since it shows significant improvement in their writing skills.

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